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Levels of analysis of the international system

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CHAPTER 4

The Levels of Analysis of The International System

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Key Words: International System; Levels of Analysis; Actors; States *versus* Individuals; Stories

Introduction

The international system is complex. It might be seen as a constellation of states interacting with one another. Or, it might be a macro-level social interaction involving actors at multiple levels: the individual decision makers, the bureaucracy, and the interest groups. Given that humans are involved—both individually and collectively—in international politics, analysis at various social levels needs to be considered, just as these factors are important in explaining social life in general.

So far, we have seen the historical evolution of global politics (Chapter 1), along with the various theories that seek to explain international politics (Chapter 2). Now we will analyze the complexities of the international system. One useful ‘tool’ for doing this is the **levels of analysis** approach, seeking to divide complex international politics into smaller, bite-sized, ‘chunks’. The levels of analysis tell several ‘stories’ about the way the international system works. For instance, the approach allows us to appreciate the various interactions between and among the individuals and the larger political environment. It also equips us with a framework for analyzing the interplay between domestic- and international factors. In short, the levels of analysis provide stories about the way the world ‘works’. This Chapter starts out with the discussion of the stories told by the levels of analysis approach. Then we explore other stories people tell about the way the international system ‘works’. The aim of this Chapter is to show

<p>Levels of analysis: ways of analyzing how foreign policy decisions are made at various levels of the state—individual policy maker; the bureaucracy; or the state as a collective.</p>
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that there are many stories out there, and as students of International Relations (IR), we need to be mindful of the benefits and disadvantages of such stories.

The Levels of Analysis: Stories We Tell

One useful, conceptual, tool in analyzing international politics is the levels of analysis approach. As the name suggests, we divide the complex reality of international politics into smaller chunks—or ‘levels’—so that studying it becomes easier, enabling us to determine *what* decisions are made by *whom*, and under *what* constraints. As such, the issue is partly methodological: *how* we might go about exploring international affairs. Frederick Frey (1985: 127) makes an important point when he says that,

Politics and political science [including IR] are indubitably about people, but in rather special sense, not in the most common intuitive sense. Political science usually does not deal with people in either their individuality or their totality.

Hence, it is the notion of **actor designation** that lies at the heart of the levels of analysis approach: designating ‘actors’—whether be it individuals, the bureaucracy, or the

<p>Actor designation: deciding who/what the main focus of analysis is going to be.</p>

state—at various overlapping levels that effect an outcome on the international stage. As Frey (1985: 147) notes, this actor designation, ‘though largely taken for granted, is a crucial feature of political analysis’. This is also the case in IR: *who* our actors will determine *what* we can discuss, and *how*.

One approach is to follow the **Three Images** identified by Kenneth Waltz. He suggests that there are three levels of analysis that can be utilized in the study of how wars occur. In the First Image, the assumption is that the egotistical human nature causes wars. This level of analysis suggests that we do not need to go further than the personal attributes of policy makers to appreciate the causes of wars. Waltz (1959: 16) argues that,

According to the first image of international relations, the locus of the important causes of war is found in the nature and behaviour of man. Wars result from selfishness, from misdirected impulses, from stupidity.

Therefore, the First Image provides us with one level of analysis: in order to appreciate international events, we need to look at individuals.

Waltz's Three Images:

- **First Image:** human behaviour (Waltz, 1959: Chapter 2);
- **Second Image:** the internal structure of states (Waltz, 1959: Chapter 4); and
- **Third Image:** international anarchy; or the constraints of the international system (Waltz, 1959: Chapter 6).

The Second Image, on the other hand, focuses on the internal constitution of the state, such as its ideological underpinnings. Arguments such as whether or not democracies are more peaceful than autocratic states determine the way we explain international events. Waltz (1959: 81) points out that,

One explanation of the second-image type is illustrated as follows. War most often promotes the internal unity of each state involved. The state plagued by internal strife may then, instead of waiting for accidental attack, seek the war that will bring internal peace.

Thus, we see a shift from an individual level to a more collective level. Yet, as we move onto the Third Image, we go 'up' another level: the anarchic nature of the international system. Waltz (1959: 159) argues that,

With many sovereign states, with no system of law enforceable among them, with each state judging its grievances and ambition according to the dictates of its own reason or desire—conflict, sometimes leading to war, is bound to occur.

At this level, the main concern is less to do with *who* the actors are, as it is to do with *how* the international system is structured. Waltz himself is sympathetic towards the Third Image, and the story he tells about the way the international system 'works' will be discussed later.

In a similar vein to Waltz, Robert Jervis (1976: 16-17) argues that perceptions and misperceptions that drive international political dynamics need to be studied with the above levels in mind. He posits that, in order for us to explain how international actors make decisions, we need to be mindful of the interplay of international-, national-, and bureaucratic levels; and deciding on which level 'is the most important may be determined by how rich and detailed an answer we are seeking'. Similarly, in order for us to fully understand the factors involved in foreign policy decision making, Graham Allison (1971) argues that we need to move back and forth between and among the various levels: the state as a whole; bureaucracies and their constraints; as well as politics between and among the individuals within government.

Levels of Analysis in US Foreign Policy towards the Middle East

When exploring the US policies towards the Middle East, there are various levels from which we can explore the topic, including:

- The personal 'chemistry' between the US president and the prime minister of Israel;
- The effects of Jewish lobby on US politics;
- The politics of United Nations (UN)—particularly the UN Security Council—in determining whether or not to sanction Syria; and
- Perceptions and misperceptions in US-Iranian diplomatic relations (*The Economist*, 15 December 2012: 48-49).

While discussing US policies towards the entire Middle East would lack focus, dividing them up into pieces allows us to make a better sense of what is happening.

Hence, paying attention to multiple levels is beneficial, as it makes it easier for us to understand the complexities of the international system. However, there are several issues with the levels of analysis approach. Are individuals really bad, as in the First Image? How then can we explain international cooperation (Waltz, 1959: 28)? And do states sharing an ideology apt to be peaceful to one another, just as the Second Image might predict (Waltz, 1959: 121)? Also, is it really the case that

democracies do not fight one another? Bruce Russett (2009) argues that the findings are inconclusive, suggesting that we need to pay close attention to other systemic factors—just as in the Third Image.

Telling Stories about the International System

The Three Images, as well as other iterations of the levels of analysis, provide us with a useful tool for analyzing international *politics*, but how about the international *system* itself? We need to bear in mind that the international system itself is usually one of the three levels of analysis. Each level of analysis can be construed as stories people tell about decision making, instances of war, and other aspects of international politics in general. Indeed, this is what many IR theorists do (see Chapter 2). Just as in the levels of analysis approach, we can start telling stories about the international system, taking into consideration different actors, focal points, and concerns. Therefore, we can also tell stories about the international system: some stories are more amenable towards the levels of analysis approach, while other stories are less so. But just as the levels of analysis provide us with a variety of explanations about international affairs, the following stories also provide us with multiple explanations of the international system.

Story One: The *Homo Economicus* View of the International System

The first story is that of the *Homo Economicus* view of the international system. By *Homo Economicus*, we mean a rational actor whose sole interest lies in the maximization of her

<p><i>Homo Economicus</i>: A philosophical depiction of humans as benefit-maximizers. In Economics, it means that humans and corporations seek to maximize profit; while in IR, it indicates that states are in constant struggle to maximize power.</p>

wellbeing. This is the view that is most prevalent in Economics and Business Studies, but traditional IR theories, such as Neorealism and Neoliberal-Institutionalism, also

follow this approach. Similar to economic presumptions about the actors and what they do, this particular story makes the following assumptions:

- Actors are *rational*, meaning they are capable of making informed decisions when faced with choices; and
- Actors are *unitary*, meaning that the proponents of this story are concerned less with what happens inside a state, than what happens when a state collectively formulates a policy. In other words, what goes on inside the state is often left out of the story.

So, when economists discuss the behaviour of corporations, they are primarily concerned about how companies make decisions as though they are individuals. Similarly, some IR theorists consider main actors to be states coping in an anarchical international system, with Waltz being one of the main proponents of this story. In his seminal book, *Theory of International Politics*, he draws lessons from Economics to make the point that international politics needs to be studied in the way economists analyze the economy. For him, domestic factors might be important; but systemic factors play an even more crucial role, such that the focus should be firmly on the behaviour of states as unitary, rational, actors, rather than what goes on inside them (Waltz, 1979: 62-63).

Therefore, this story makes several working assumptions about how the international system ‘works’:

- Actors in this story refer solely to states. While Neorealists recognize other potential actors on the international stage, given that it is the states who enjoy legitimate monopoly of violence, non-state actors such as Multinational Corporations (MNCs) become less significant.
- As mentioned above, states are considered as unitary actors, meaning they are to be treated as ‘things’. Again, while Neorealists recognize the role of groups, such as bureaucracies and interest groups; as well as those of charismatic individuals, such as John Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, these factors are considered less significant.

- This story also takes for granted that the international system is anarchic, meaning there is no world government or world police. While ‘anarchy’ sounds as if the international system is chaotic, it does not have to be so.

Thus, this story provides a very simplified view of the international system. As Waltz (1979: 9) argues, the main task is to construct *a* model of reality, not *the* reality. For Neorealists, this simplicity is the primary strength of this story.

In order for states to guarantee their own survival, the Neorealists think that states are constantly seeking to maximize their power. *Power* in this case is defined as the ability to influence others. This includes physical ability to influence your opponent’s thinking, such as possessing nuclear weapons; or it could be psychological power—the ability to change others’ thinking without any physical or financial outlay on your part (Morgenthau, 1985: Chapter 1). The result is a constant competition for survival. Accordingly, cooperation between and among actors might happen; but the fear of someone renegeing on promises is too great, to the extent that there is a constant fear of war. And if everyone in the international system thinks this, the logical conclusion is that wars can happen at any moment. John Mearsheimer (1995) warns us that, just because the European Union (EU) provides a forum for member states to negotiate their national interests, the EU is not a world government, nor is it an international police force. As such, Mearsheimer argues that EU cannot prevent war in Europe—if it ever comes to that. This pessimism is the hallmark of this particular story. The vision of the international system resembles a billiard table, where billiard balls collide and react against one another.

Waltz (1959: 227) suggests that,

According to this [thinking], there is a constant possibility of war in a world in which there are two or more states each seeking to promote a set of interests and having no agency above them upon which they can rely for protection.

This is because the ‘state in the world are like individuals in the state of nature. They are neither perfectly good nor are they controlled by law’ (Waltz, 1959: 163). At this level of analysis, the anarchic nature of the international system begins to resemble Rousseau’s ‘stag hunt’. This is a hypothetical situation in which five hungry men agree to cooperate in a joint endeavour to catch a stag. When the five slowly approach the target, one man sees a hare. Because he is hungry, he jumps for it—after all, there

is no guarantee that the five can capture the stag, and he thinks that he has a good chance of catching the hare for food. As a result, the stag escapes. The lesson here is this: under anarchic conditions, cooperation becomes difficult (Waltz, 1959: 167-68). Such a way of thinking provides the justification for this story: what is at stake is the way unitary state actors interact with one another. Using the stag hunt analogy, while what might be happening inside each man's head might be salient, what is more important is what happens when individuals decide to act to maximize their interests—in this case, satisfying their hunger, and therefore, the urge to survive.

This is the basic framework that the Neorealists use to analyze the way the international system works. It is the anarchic structure of the international system that makes it difficult for state actors to see beyond their own, individual, self interests (= survival). In short, wars occur because there is nothing to prevent them from happening (Waltz, 1959: 232). The proponents of this story think it a waste of resources to hope that cooperation can take place, especially if there is a real danger of your friend turning into your enemy at some point. The flip-side of this argument is that cooperation is seen as a rare mutual coincidence of wants, though there is no guarantee that it can be sustained. The proponents of this story assume that the possibility of conflict is always there, and postulate that actors are constantly preparing for such an event.

The Critique

As you can see, the lack of insight into domestic actors, coupled with the assumption that national interests of state actors are predefined in terms of maximizing power means that this level of analysis takes an overtly top-down, holistic, view. The state actors are effectively 'black boxed' in this story to the extent that they are almost like atoms engaged in some form of a chain reaction. Despite what we might read in the newspapers—such as the preferences of US presidents colliding with those of the Congress in many American foreign policy areas including China, Iran, and international trade—these factors are recognized and yet trivialized. This story provides a very simplified and accessible model of the international system; but it prevents us from asking questions such as the role of domestic coalition patterns in

the formulation of foreign policies, as is usually the case in European states; or the role of religion in Iranian foreign policy, or the ideological- and historical dimensions of Chinese foreign relations.

To be sure, this story provides an entry-level analysis into the study of international politics. This story is exactly the sort of description of the international system that we are familiar with in media reporting. Yet, there is no escaping that the

black boxing of

states leaves many

questions

unanswered. The

more we think about

what makes states

act in the way they do; and the more we wonder about what motivates presidents and prime ministers to make decisions that they make, we need to start plying into the black box of states. This story necessarily provides a macroscopic view of the international system. It is a good start, but it begs more questions than it answers.

<p>Black boxing of states: an assumption that considers states to be unitary actors; and that only their foreign policy outcomes matter in international politics. As such, only a cursory attention is given to domestic politics. This is an approach favoured by Neorealists and Neoliberal-Institutionalists.</p>
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Story Two: Power, Cooperation, Norms, and Interdependence

The previous story on the international system focused primarily on the *system-level* analysis. That is, state- and bureaucratic levels were deemed to be less important in understanding how the world ‘works’. In that story, wars occur because there is nothing to prevent them from happening. We now move onto another story which shares similar assumptions about the anarchic nature of the international system, but takes on a less pessimistic outlook compared to Neorealists. This story is often told by Neoliberal-Institutionalists (see Chapter 2).

The Role of Institutions

The proponents of this story take **international institutions** very seriously. Here, ‘institutions’ include international organizations like the UN and the EU. While there

are various discussions on the different meanings attached to terms such as ‘institutions’, ‘regimes’, and ‘organizations’, for the purposes of this chapter, we use them interchangeably (Hasenclever, *et al.*, 1997: Chapter 2).

According to Stephen Krasner (quoted in Keohane, 1982: 341-42), institutions embody ‘principles (“beliefs of fact, causation, and rectitude”) and norms (“standards of behavior defined in terms of rights and obligations”) as well as rules and decision making procedures’. Unlike the pessimism of Neorealism, this story is optimistic that actors are able to realize the longer-term benefits of cooperation. This is in stark contrast to

International institution:
set of rules and norms for international behaviour. Can be both formal (e.g., the UN) and informal (the so-called ‘special relationship’ between the US and the UK).

Neorealists who consider international cooperation to be a mere coincidence. A very good example might be the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO): the Cold War has ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union; but NATO has found new *raison d’etre* in Kosovo and Afghanistan, for instance. Now, this does not mean that the proponents of this story consider international institutions to be a panacea. They do consider actors to be rational egotists who are ‘hard-wired’ into making cost-benefit calculations. Indeed, Robert Keohane (1984: 73) argues that, ‘although international regimes may be valuable to their creators, *they do not necessarily improve world welfare*. They are not *ipso facto* “good”’. Yet, they also question the pessimism of Neorealism. Keohane (1984: 7) states that, ‘[i]f international politics were a state of war, institutionalized patterns of cooperation on the basis of shared purposes should not exist except as part of a large struggle for power’. For Keohane (1984: 51-52; emphases deleted), ‘intergovernmental cooperation takes place when the policies actually followed by one government are regarded by its partners as facilitating realization of their own objectives, as the result of a process of policy coordination’. Hence, this story suggest that states are also capable of looking at the longer term benefits, as compared to the assumption that actors are short-termist, as in the stag hunt example. Hence, the Neoliberals see the international system as potentially a billiard ball model, but consider that international institutions can ameliorate some of the worst excesses of international anarchy. It is precisely because the states are rational actors that they create international regimes as a way to ‘establish stable mutual expectation about others’ patters of behaviour and to develop

working relationships that will allow the parties to adapt their practices to new structures’ (Keohane, 1982: 331). One factor that makes this possible in the eyes of the Neoliberals is the existence of *norms*—‘standards of behaviour defined in terms of rights and obligations’ (Keohane, 1984: 57). Neoliberal-Institutionalists allege that international regimes are akin to international ‘market’ for national interests: once the state actors agree to enter into that ‘market’, they are socialized into the particular ways of behaviour expected of them in that context. Through such a process, a notion of reciprocity emerges through which participants come to expect how others will act within that particular context (Hasenclever, *et al.*, 1997: 9-10).

This way of thinking potentially opens up the level of analysis to include non-state actors, such as MNCs with enough economic clout to become a significant player on the world stage. Once cooperation is understood as sustainable, and not just a coincidence, then other entities can be granted actorhood. If war is seen as almost a default position within the international system, then state actors are the only entities capable of exerting influence. However, if a story allows for the institutionalization of cooperative behaviours, then other entities become more visible, due to their influence on the world stage. The global financial crisis following the Lehman Shock of September 2008 is a case in point: the idea that some banks are ‘too big to fail’ gains potency because they are recognized as powerful actors in the international system, either because their failures can precipitate a financial contagion; or because the governments are heavily dependent on these banks to underwrite their debts.

Hence, this story is much more complex than the previous one, simply because there are more vectors of interaction between and among the state- and non-state actors. To be sure, some Neorealists such as Robert Gilpin (1987) recognize that non-state actors might play an important role, but they also suggest that states tramp non-state actors. But, the complexity of the Neoliberal story makes an important move in the levels of analysis, because of the shift down from Waltz’s Third Image down towards the Second Image, if not the First Image. The potentials for complex interactions between and among the various actors and the recognition that both politics and

Complex interdependence: an idea in which the international system is comprised of states and non-state actors interacting cooperatively (especially economically), while maintaining a semblance of balance of power (especially militarily) (Nye and Keohane, 1977).

economics play crucial roles in the way the international system works gives rise to the notion of **complex interdependence** (Keohane and Nye, 1977). Furthermore, firmly within the First Image is another derivation of this story, introducing the notion of *policy entrepreneurs*—individuals who are charismatic and instrumental in bringing about change. These policy entrepreneurs provide convincing arguments and ideas that can influence the course of international outcomes, such as the negotiations leading up to the evolution of the EU in the 1980s and the 1990s (Moravcsik, 1999). Hence, the variations of the second story allow proponents to construct a variety of models that help explain the complex workings of the international system—not something that is possible with the inherent simplicity of Neorealism.

The Critique

This story is more complex than the first story: the decision to take international cooperation seriously opens the way for discussions on international institutions, as well as potentials to recognize other actors in the international arena, including MNCs and individuals. It is a story not just of balance of power but one of power and interdependence in which rational actors at various levels of analysis engage in rivalry as well as cooperation. As such, we are beginning to move away from solely focusing on Waltz's Third Image of international relations, but gradually allowing us to explore Second- and First Images. It also allows us to engage better with Allison's three levels of foreign policy analysis in which decisions made at individual-, group-, and state levels can all impact on the workings of the international system. The model here is more complex, and are therefore more difficult to conceptualize than Neorealism; but it also allows us to appreciate the interplay of various forces that are behind world affairs (see Chapters 6 and 7).

However, it is also the case that this story shares some of the problems of the previous one. On the one hand, this story holds potentials to widen the scope of enquiry, moving away from a simplistic billiard ball model. As such, there is great promise in proposing a truly systemic exploration of the international system. However, just as Neorealism effectively reduces explanation to unit-level analysis, there is an inherent danger that Neoliberals might end up doing the same. Despite the

promise of a story that seems to take seriously the complex nature of the international system, the entangled web of interactions remains underutilized. Put differently, if and when a proponent of this story needs to decide who the most influential actor might be, there is not much choice but to favour states over other actors. Hence, while an exploration into First- and Second Images are always possible in this story, the default position remains the Third Image.

Story Three: The Web of Social Interactions

So far we have seen two stories that are more or less focused on the role of state actors. They differ from one another in that the first story provided very much a top-down view of the world that depicted international system as a billiard ball model, on the one hand; while the second story provided a picture of the international system in which international regimes acted as a market for national interests, on the other. The first story was less interested in domestic dynamics, focusing instead on the states as rational egotists. In contrast, the second story created a space for other actors, including MNCs and individuals, to be considered as influencing international affairs. However, once we take a step back, they seem to share a common trait: that states are the most influential actors on the international stage. Indeed, it is interesting to see Keohane (1988: 312) arguing that system level theories, including Neorealism and Neoliberalism, do not pay ‘sufficient attention to domestic politics’. This a striking comment, as Keohane—one of the main proponents of the second story—is arguing to move back from the Third- to Second-, if not the First Image analysis.

The third story of the international system seeks to address Keohane’s critique. While maintaining some element of systemic analysis, this story also provides a conceptual tool for IR theorists to take domestic politics into consideration. This story seeks to do this by considering the international system as a macro-level social interaction. Compared to the billiard ball analogy of the First Story, the international system in the Third Story is much more complex. Instead of considering the state to be an innate black box akin to an automaton, the Third Story treats states as intentional actors who are engaged in social interactions, comparable to individuals within human society. One major proponent of this story, Alexander Wendt (1999:

217), suggests that states and societies ‘have a collective dimension that causes macro-level regularities among their elements ... over space and time’. As such, we are looking at potentially a very complex theory of the international system.

In treating the international system as a macro-level social sphere, the proponents of the third story, namely **Constructivists**, make the following assumptions:

- Just like human interaction within communities and societies, meanings are important
- Actors are assumed to be intentional, not just rational. This means that actors have identities and use symbolisms in their interactions
- Actors could be states, groups, or individuals, thereby opening the way for an even more complex analysis of the international system than the second story

The main concern for Constructivists has less to do with the appropriate levels of analysis as it is to do with the nature of the international system more generally. In

Constructivism: A theoretical approach in which actors’ perceptions, ideas, images, and symbols are taken seriously. Borrows heavily from Social Theory and Philosophy of Language.

other words, the third story is concerned about the *social context* of the international system.

Take our everyday social context. In our relationships, we have friends and foes. We sort of know how it feels to be with friends—it differs from how it feels to be with our nemeses. But the most important thing is this: friendship or foe depends primarily on how we interact with other individuals. In other words, friendship is one form of social context; we act towards our friends in a particular way, because that is the ‘right thing’ for us to do; and we expect our friends to act towards us in a particular way as well. In short, we have identities as friends; and that contextualizes the interaction (= friendship) into a particular social dynamic.

Constructivists model the international system in a similar way. Instead of friends and foes, we can substitute allies and enemies. States, for instance, have a very good idea of who the allies are, and who the potential enemies might be. Unlike the

Neorealist international system where everyone else is a potential enemy, the proponents of the third story suggest that allies and enemies are the products of socialization—how states have behaved toward one another over time. States expect allies to act in a particular way, invoking collective defence when an ally comes under fire (see Chapter 13). Wendt (1999: 97) suggests that the structure of the international system is all about ideas; and he suggests that ‘history matters’ because it is through history that precedents create meanings for a particular international context (Wendt, 1999: 109).

The logical conclusion to this is that the Constructivists consider the anarchic structure of the international system to be a **social construct**. This is in stark contrast to the Neorealist assumption that anarchy is the defining feature of the international system. Wendt (1992: 395) argues that ‘self-help and power politics are institutions, not essential features of anarchy. *Anarchy is what states make of it*’, just as friendship relies on friends sustaining that relationship. Hence, Constructivism provides a significant corrective to the first story: there is nothing deterministic about the

Social Construct: any ‘thing’ which exists by virtue of humans reproducing its concept. Intangible ‘things’ such as ‘society’ and ‘state’ are good examples of social constructions. While social constructs might seem like figments of people’s imaginations, they nevertheless impact on humans by affecting the way we behave.

international system; and that actors are not billiard balls, but rather, intentional actors, just as individuals in society have intentions. For instance, Waltz’s use of market analogy to show that actors are rational egotists is criticized for failing to appreciate that markets themselves are social constructions, relying heavily on participants’ intentions (Kratochwil, 1989: 47). Furthermore, there is also a critique of the second story. John Ruggie (1998: 63) argues that, while the Neoliberals’ attention to international regimes is useful, their analyses are inadequate, given that the success or failure of regimes also depends ‘by the intentionality and acceptability others attribute to those acts in the contexts of an intersubjective framework of meaning’.

In this story, individual human decisions are as important as the analysis of what states do at collective levels. States might remain one of the main actors; but Constructivists are ready to pay close attention to other actors such as individuals and groups. In that sense, the third story has moved on from the Third Image to the other images. Also, it seems as if this story is concerned with *all three levels* of decision

making. Again, there are parallels to Allison's three levels, as Constructivists pay close attention to what individuals and groups do. This story recognizes that groups and other macro-level social actors such as the state, MNCs, non-governmental organizations, bureaucracies, and society, are all made of individuals acting in their respective roles within various levels. Put differently, the Constructivists are cognisant of the fact that social actors are *layered* actors comprised of:

- Individuals with their identities and personal beliefs and backgrounds (see Chapter 6);
- These individuals come together to form groups, including various levels of decision making in governments and other organizations; and
- These individuals and groups make individual- and collective decisions in the name of the organizations that they *represent* (Wight, 2006).

In other words: individuals (presidents, prime ministers, company executives) come together to form an executive branch; the executives deliberate on a policy; and particular individuals vested with particular roles and decision making powers within the executive (President John F. Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis or Steve Jobs deciding on the design of iPhones) make decisions that represent the collective decision of the organization.

To be sure, the third story is not fully compatible with the Three Images or the levels of analysis precisely because it is more concerned with the web of interaction between and among the individuals and groups. Put differently, Constructivism is interested in:

- How states, as complex social entities, interact with one another;
- How ideas shape the world;
- How individuals with their identities and biases come together and negotiate an outcome as a group; and
- How individuals and social entities 'think' about the world.

Hence, the third story is not 'structural' in that it is not only interested in states as billiard balls; nor is it necessarily interested in focusing on the groups and individuals.

Instead, the third story tells a very complex story of the international system that is starting to resemble stories about society and our day-to-day experiences. To that extent, Constructivists do not necessarily subscribe to the neat delineation of Three Images nor the three levels of decision making.

The Critique

From the perspective of the third story, both the first- and second stories treat states and other actors as lacking intentions, and as a result, they resemble automatons. This is problematic for Constructivists since there is nothing deterministic about the way the international system ‘works’. Furthermore, given the Constructivists’ interest in identities as a source of actor interests, the Neorealist- and Neoliberal penchant for interests as things that are predetermined by the structure of the international system becomes an issue. Simultaneously, the Constructivist assumption that social actors are layered actors enables a smoother transition from one level of analysis to another.

What sets the third story apart from the first two is its attention to intangibles, such as ideas and intentions. On the one hand, this is a definite plus, as our daily experiences are full of intangibles, such as meanings we attach to our actions. We are able to distinguish between the subtle nuances in our daily lives; and even within the international system, there are subtleties in the form of ambiguities that govern the way state actors interact with one another. The American ‘pivot’ back to the Asia-Pacific might be another instance of a social context full of meanings and symbolisms. Is rising China a threat? If so, then the US intentions might be to contain China. If China is not a threat, then how are we to understand US intentions? Is Washington jealously trying to maintain its hegemonic power? It is primarily a case of ‘where you stand depends on where you sit’; and the Constructivists take this very seriously.

However, the third story is extremely complex. As a model for analyzing the international system, it involves guess work—guessing what the various actions mean. It does not help that one of the main proponents of this story, Wendt (1999: Chapter 3), is uncertain whether or not the international structure is comprised of ‘ideas all the way down’. From the perspective of the first two stories, there is a question of how

‘scientific’ this story really is (Keohane, 1988: 392). Perhaps this is an unfair critique, but it is an issue that needs to be addressed by those who subscribe to this story.

Story Four: International System as a Story

The three stories thus far shared some similarities while being distinct in their own ways. On the one hand, the first two stories focused mainly on the system-level analysis exploring how actors—both state- as well as non-state—behave in an anarchic international system. On the other hand, the third story emphasized that the international system is akin to a macro-level social interaction in which social actors, large and small, interact with one another; and in analyzing such a complex web of social interaction, we need to move up and down the various levels of analysis. As such, the three stories operate at particular points on the levels of analysis as a framework for understanding the way international system operates.

The fourth story is radically different. It is highly critical of the preceding stories. Critical in a sense that it engages with the three stories, ‘takes apart’ the logic of these stories, and seeks to unravel the ‘hidden meanings’. For theorists accustomed to the three stories, the fourth one makes for a very uncomfortable reading; but these criticisms are worth exploring. As for the levels of analysis, it is seen as just one of many stories we might tell about the world. But the fourth story also tells us that there are many other stories to be told about international life. It is for this reason that this story is truly critical.

The main theme of the fourth story is **metaphor**. What is meant here is that social reality is constituted of symbols, language, performance, and other forms of representations, as opposed to the ‘certainty’ of the existence of the state or the international system as a ‘thing’ to be analyzed. Put

Metaphor: a figure of speech in which a word is used to describe something it does not literally mean (Blackburn 1994: 240).

The phrase, the ‘Axis of Evil’, used by President George W. Bush in January 2002 to describe Iraq, Iran, and North Korea is an example of metaphor *in practice*. Some IR Theorists consider the notion of unitary state as a metaphor as well, given that a state is a social construct—a product of human interactions.

differently, the fourth story has problems with whatever is meant by the ‘state’, the ‘international system’, ‘national interests’, and so on. This story is concerned less with how to provide a ‘scientific’ understanding of international politics, as it is concerned primarily with the ways in which we use language and ideas to explain and represent our international experience. It is, by definition, critical: it is critical because this story seeks to unravel the ‘common sense’ that seems to permeate within the three previous stories about the need to prioritize states and their behaviours.

Hence, one of the levels of analysis, the state, ceases to be as clear-cut an entity as it was in the first two stories. Even the more complex formulation of the state as a complex social entity does not escape criticism. Iver Neumann (2004: 260) takes issues with such formulations, suggesting instead that we should treat states as discursive constructions—or metaphors—accusing Wendt and others of ‘programmatically reifying social phenomena’. For him, treating states as complex social entities, let alone things to be analyzed, ‘seems to constrain rather than to enable our inquiry into what is happening to states and their place in global politics here and now’ (Neumann, 2004: 267). Thus, the proponents of the fourth story are insinuating that states are not so much ‘things out there’, but rather a set of symbols and meanings that change from time to time. Put differently, they are arguing that states are not things we ‘analyze’ but they are things we ‘talk about’. To say that states—and other things in international relations—are metaphors provides potentials for transformation: changes in the way we alter our interpretations about, and meanings we attach to, concepts in IR such as states potentially transform our understanding of them. Consequently, just as we are interested in the various stories we tell about the levels of analysis of the international system, the proponents of this story consider ideas *about* states to be another set of stories.

In a further critique of the Constructivist depiction of the international system as a complex web of social relations, Roxanne Lynn Doty (1997: 376) argues that it should be treated not as a constellation of state actors interacting with one another in a social context, but rather, as a set of practices. She suggests that the concern with tangible entities

The fourth story is often told by theorists belonging to Poststructuralism or Postmodernism in IR Theory. While these labels might be inaccurate, it is important to remember their common approach to IR: the primacy of language in the way we understand the world.

such as the state and the international system prevents us from telling stories that are based on meanings and practices. She argues that practice is ‘inextricably connected to the production of meanings’, since it is more fruitful to consider the international system as sets of practices rather than overlapping layers. For her, the international system is a set of practices that are ‘embedded in discourse(s) which enable particular meaning(s) to be signified’ (Doty, 1997: 377). In this formulation, the international system becomes less of a structured realm where actors at various levels interact with one another, but more as a set of meanings that change over time. Doty (1997: 385) notes that, ‘[w]hat becomes sayable, doable, imaginable within a society results from a process of discursive repetition and dissemination’. This includes our stories about the international system: Doty (*Ibid.*) posits that ‘the issues of agency and structure(s) cannot be adequately or critically examined without also examining representational practices’.

In a similar vein, foreign policy is treated in a significantly different manner. Instead of approaching foreign policy as sets of decision making processes that can be analyzed from various levels, the proponents of the fourth story identify elements of meanings and practices that are inherent in it. David Campbell (1998: 69) argues that foreign policy is the ‘constant (re)construction of identity through the strategy of otherness’, that it is a ‘discourse of power that is global in scope yet national in legitimation’(Campbell, 1998: 70). Hence, Campbell is suggesting that foreign policy is less an outcome of decision making against which the levels of analysis approach can be applied, as it is a set of practices and meanings about national identities as well as a shared sense of danger as a result of historic practice. In short, foreign policy is about understanding ‘who we are’, and ‘whom we are against’. For him, ‘it is the objectification of the self through the representation of danger that Foreign Policy helps achieve’ (Campbell, 1998: 71). Hence, in addition to Doty’s preoccupation with practice, Campbell is concerned about shifting worldviews that give rise to the notion of *us versus them*. The main focus of the fourth story ceases to revolve around how we conceptualize the relationship between the actor and the international system; but rather, the primary aim is to critique the ‘language’ of ‘talking about’

The main message of the fourth story is this: the international order, as we know it today, is an accident of history. Hence, concepts such as the ‘state’ and the notion of ‘sovereignty’ are products of particular events in history.

states and the international system. Subtle though this may seem, such distinction becomes crucial in appreciating the fourth story.

Hence, the fourth story is quite subversive. On the surface, this story refuses to engage with the other three. Yet, it is also the case that this story recognizes an important point: however much other stories seek to provide a more definitive tool for analyzing the international system, they remain stories that one can decide whether or not to adopt. By extension, the levels of analysis considerations remain another set of stories that people tell about international relations: the choice of Waltzian First-, Second-, or Third Image is really about a choice of stories with which one wants to engage. The first two stories focused on the role of states within the international system; but they remain only two of many stories we can tell, however much this way of telling about the world has been the most dominant of stories (Walker, 1993: 126). R.B.J. Walker (1993: 154-55) notes that, '[s]tates, it is often observed, have not disappeared. Nor have they lost their capacity to deploy violence on a frightening scale. But this says very little about the continuing capacity of states to resolve the contradiction between citizenship and humanity through claims to absolute authority'. For Walker (1993: Chapter 5), if territorial sovereignty is the defining element of the international system, it is because this is simply an accident of history. If the levels of analysis are seen to be pertinent to our understanding of how the world 'works', again, it is because we are made to think so. In essence, the fourth story seeks to demonstrate that there are many more stories waiting to be told about how the world 'works'.

The Critique

The fourth story differs significantly from the previous three stories in its approach to the international system and to the levels of analysis. This story provides a dramatic critique of the other stories, unravelling the subtle biases and exposing the inherent assumptions underlying each of the other stories. To this extent, the fourth story is very subversive; and its readiness to admit that we are all telling stories about the international system is revealing. This story provides us with a further set of tools to critically reassess other stories and question their underlying assumptions. In other words, this story equips us with a critical 'tool box' to deconstruct any story anyone is telling about the way the international system 'works'.

If anything, this story is inconclusive. It is one thing for us to appreciate that we are all telling stories. It is quite another for us to simply suggest that other theories are stories. While we can appreciate that we are telling stories about whatever concerns us on the international stage, this story prevents us from asking questions such as ‘how would Iran respond to US sanctions?’; or ‘what is the role of identity politics in the Arab-Israeli conflict?’ Yes, they are stories, after all; but it is not at all clear whether reducing everything down to stories might help us in exploring whatever international events that make us curious. To be sure, stories are important, and we all engage in story-telling; but it is also the case that we tell stories with a particular aim of explaining or understanding the complexities of the international system. We tell stories because we have intentions to try to engage with what is happening around the world. This is an important thing that must not be overlooked.

Conclusion

The levels of analysis provide us with a useful starting point for the study of international politics. It is a versatile methodological tool that allows us to appreciate various factors affecting decision making processes. The levels of analysis enable us to ask questions about how foreign policy decisions are made, or how international conflicts emerge. Furthermore, moving back and forth among the various levels enables us to understand how each of the levels interacts with one another. While the proponents of the levels of analysis approach might have preferences over which levels to prioritize, this way of looking at IR makes us more aware of the complexities of the reality of international life.

However, there are limits as to whether we can adopt the levels of analysis approach to the study of the international system. The main reason for this is that the international system itself is one of the levels of analysis—whether be it the study of international conflicts or foreign policy decision making. Given the usefulness of this approach, having an enhanced set of tools for the study of the international system would be beneficial. As seen in previous chapters, there are many perspectives on the way world politics evolved over time and space (Chapter 1), as well as many different ways of theorizing about it (Chapter 2). Taking multiple perspectives further enables

us to think about stories we might tell about the international system. Some of the stories are amenable to the levels of analysis approach, while others might be fundamentally at odds with it. To the extent that the levels of analysis also tell stories about how foreign policy decisions are made, or how international conflicts come about, we can tell stories about the international system itself. In short, the stories we tell represent how we **'hook up to the world'** (Jackson, 2011: xii; xiii), precisely because we need to tell particular stories about the complex realities of the international system due to our limited conceptual capacities (Jackson, 2011: Chapter 1).

As stated above, one of the benefits of the levels of analysis approach is that they enable us to take variations in the way we can depict international actors seriously. While we do need to be mindful of their interactions with the systemic

Patrick Jackson (2011) is implying that the story we—as students of International Relations—decide to tell is primarily determined by how we understand our complex world. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' story; and the task for us is to try to tell a convincing story about our observations and experiences.

constraints of the international political environment, once we are aware of the benefits and limits of the levels of analysis approach, we can better appreciate what the actors are thinking, how they might behave within the international system, and the effects their actions might have on the outcomes of world politics.

Questions for Reflection

1. What are the *pros* and *cons* of the levels of analysis approach?
2. What are the main characteristics of the first story?
3. What is the main difference between the second- and first stories?
4. What is meant by treating the international system as a macro-level social interaction?
5. What are the *pros* and *cons* of the fourth story?

Revision Quiz

Q1. What is Waltz's Third Image?

- (a) The State
- (b) Ideology
- (c) Political leaders
- (d) The international system

Q2. What is Allison's second level of analysis?

- (a) The state
- (b) Ideology
- (c) Bureaucracy
- (d) The international system

Q3. What role do international institutions play?

- (a) Conduct wars
- (b) Resolve wars
- (c) Act as a 'market place'
- (d) Not much

Q4. What factor is considered most important by Realists?

- (a) Power
- (b) Cooperation
- (c) International institutions
- (d) Norms

Q5. Which level of analysis does Waltz think is most important?

- (a) The state
- (b) The individual
- (c) Bureaucracy
- (d) The international system

Q6. Do the proponents of fourth story subscribe to the levels of analysis approach?

- (a) Yes
- (b) No

Q7. Do Constructivists subscribe to the levels of analysis approach?

- (a) Yes, definitely
- (b) Yes, to an extent that the international system is complex
- (c) Yes, to the extent that it is preoccupied with foreign policy
- (d) Definitely not

Q.8. Which level of analysis does Robert Jervis say is most important?

- (a) The individual
- (b) The bureaucracy
- (c) The international system
- (d) All levels are important in international politics

Q9. What do the first- and second Stories agree on?

- (a) The role of individuals
- (b) The role of international institutions
- (c) The role of states
- (d) The role of MNCs

Q10. The fourth story believes in one true story

- (a) True
- (b) False

Answers: 1 (d); 2 (c); 3 (c); 4 (a); 5 (d); 6 (No); 7 (b); 8 (d); 9 (c); 10 (False)

Key Texts for Further Reading

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